

How Did Christianity Happen?

Mike Bird and James Crossley

Maurice Casey Responds to Mike Bird

'The purpose of my response is ... to take issue with those of his [Bird's] points which arise out of his evangelical Christian convictions' (p. 183) and that is precisely what Maurice Casey does in his dismantling of Mike's arguments concerning 'the earliest witnesses', 'the four canonical gospels', 'miracles', 'virgin birth and resurrection' and 'the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith'.

Casey points out first that Mike claims that he differs from James in that he (Bird) accepts 'the interpretation of the events by the earliest witnesses', he 'shares their faith' (p. 183). Casey astutely observes that in fact Mike doesn't at all believe the report of the earliest witnesses since he doesn't believe the Gospel testimony of the Jews who do not believe in Jesus. 'The evidence that some Jews were not convinced by Jesus is just as important as the evidence of the Gospel writers ... and their evidence should be taken just as seriously. Bird does not 'share their faith', for they had the faith of first century Jews who did not accept Jesus' (p. 183).

Casey next takes Bird to the woodshed for underplaying '... the differences between John and the Synoptics, especially over their Christology. In so doing, he compares John with the completed Synoptic Gospels, rather than with the historical Jesus' (p. 184). This is, in my estimation, a dreadfully important point. Methodologically, when one speaks of the historical Jesus one is obliged to note the theological character of the witnesses we possess and one is, further, obligated to draw a sharp distinction between what Jesus was and who he was to himself and his contemporaries and what the Gospels have made of him. This particular fact is overlooked in far too much historical Jesus research so it's more than a bit refreshing to see Casey note it.

Casey also notes that Bird doesn't really take Jesus as seriously as he imagines and his chief piece of evidence is Mark 9:1. Jesus clearly believed that the Kingdom would come in his own lifetime and that simply did not happen. 'In this case, Bird does not share the faith of Jesus, and has not taken seriously Jesus' first-century culture' (p.186).

Casey also has issues with Bird's definition of 'miracle' and observes in this connection that Mike '... believes in the miracle stories in the four Gospels, and apparently not in any others' (p. 187). 'He appears to suppose that people believe in all the Gospel miracles or none of them' (ibid.). Casey illuminates the rather odd 'miracle' perspective of Bird by showing, conclusively, that, for instance, the story of the Gadarene demoniac doesn't fit Bird's own definition. 'Mark was not concerned about the geography of the Decapolis. Whether this was in the country of the Gerasenes or the Gadarenes makes the difference between whether the pigs had to run 33 miles, or 6 miles, to get to the lake of Galilee! This tale is a warning to be wary of the wiles of storytellers' (p. 188). Bird is deaf to this nuance, however.

The chief criticism of Bird by Casey, though, at least as it seems to me, is his imputation of the Christology of the Gospels on Jesus and the earliest witnesses. 'Like most New Testament scholars, he cannot read the language Jesus spoke, and consequently he cannot even begin to explain how the underlying Aramaic idiom could have been used in a 'deliberately veiled and cryptic messianic claim'. For the same reason, he cannot consider whether sayings which he attributes to Jesus could have been spoken in Aramaic' (p. 194)!

'I conclude that Bird is seriously mistaken. His evangelical convictions lead him to ... view the Christ of evangelical faith as if he were the Jesus of history' (p. 194).

Are Casey's criticisms fair and accurate? We shall have opportunity to test them in due course. For now it will have to suffice to say that like so many evangelicals, Mike has forgotten that the biblical materials are theological in nature. As soon as they are historicized, the historians can, and do, smash into pieces the artificial reconstructions that theologian/ historians offer.

Next we turn to the views of Crossley.